

A Jewish Woman in the Governor’s Mansion

By Peter L. Rothholz

When Chaim Potok decided to call his extraordinary history of the Jews *Wanderings*, he summed up in a single word the salient characteristic that distinguishes us from all other peoples.

I would suggest, however, that not even he could imagine that one family’s journey would take them from a Polish *shtetlet* to the State House in Honolulu in just three generations. Yet, that is the story of the family of Linda Lingle, the Governor of Hawaii.

Governor Lingle was born in St. Louis, MO, in 1953 and moved to Los Angeles with her family at the age of 12. She completed both high school and college there, graduating *cum laude* with a degree from California State University at Northridge with a degree in journalism.

Shortly after leaving college, she and her family moved to

After spending a year in Honolulu, she moved to the small island of Molokai where she founded the *Molokai Free Press*, a community newspaper to serve the island’s population of just 6,000 residents.

When I asked her how she adjusted to life in such a small community, with hardly any Jews, after having lived in St. Louis and L.A., she replied that Hawaii made her “feel it was somewhere where I belonged.” In a State where two out of three people are of Asian or Pacific Islander descent, and where the remainder are of many different backgrounds, she found it unlike anywhere she had ever been. The tensions she witnessed in Los Angeles during the Viet Nam era had by-passed Hawaii and people were more tolerant of one another. She pointed out that in Hawaii

for five consecutive two-year terms and building a reputation in the realm of planning and zoning, she was elected Mayor of Maui County in 1990, becoming the youngest, the first woman and the only non-Maui born person ever elected to that office. Among her many accomplishments was an innovative program to implement performance-based budgeting. Moreover, throughout her term, job growth was faster on Maui than anywhere else in the state.

She campaigned for governor in 1998, losing by just one percent of the vote. That same year, she was named the most respected woman in Hawaii in an independent poll commissioned by one of the state’s leading magazines. A Republican in a state previously known as a Democratic stronghold, she campaigned for governor again in 2002 and this time she won, thereby becoming the first woman and the first mayor to serve as Governor of Hawaii. She is also the first Jew ever and the first Republican to lead the state since 1962.

“While I don’t make a big deal about my religion,” she says, “everybody knows I’m Jewish and the state’s Jewish population is proud of me and helps me.” There are presently about 10,000 Jews living in Honolulu with significantly smaller numbers on each of the neighbor islands. Honolulu has two synagogues. Temple Emanuel, the Reform congregation, is well established and has its own building. There is also a smaller Conservative congregation which currently holds services in a Unitarian church. And Chabad, which has been in Hawaii for some 15 years, is strong and very active.

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, thousands of tourists were stranded in Hawaii, among them many Jews. Since the High Holy Days came a few days later, Chabad quickly sprang into action and welcomed worshipers from many countries the world over to *Rosh Hashanah* services at the Chabad House.

The Governor goes to all three services at different times and, at Passover, she says, “I go *seder* hopping.” Last Passover, she hosted a *seder* at the Governor’s Mansion to which she invited some 200 guests. The Chabad *rebbetzin*, Mrs. Pearl Krasnjansky, koshered the mansion’s kitchen, brought in the appropriate dishes and cutlery and taught the chef, a native Ha-

waiian, how to prepare the traditional *seder* meal. The event was a huge success and received extensive media coverage.

Angeles visits there frequently and the Governor will participate in a mission of Hawaiians to Israel under the Consul-General’s



Hula girls celebrate at Governor Linda Lingle’s inauguration ceremony.

Hawaii, where her father joined his brother’s automobile dealership.

As a result of her experience as editor of her college newspaper, Linda obtained a job as the public information officer for the Hawaii Teamsters and Hotel Workers Union and where her

one of every two marriages is between people of different ethnic backgrounds and that people are accepted as individuals regardless of their membership in one group or another.

Her role as editor and publisher of a local newspaper whetted Linda’s appetite for public



Governor Linda Lingle signs autographs after her inauguration.

responsibilities included editing a monthly newspaper for the union’s members.

service, and, in 1980, she was elected to the Maui County Council. After serving on the council



Governor Linda Lingle

While she does not come from a particularly observant home, Governor Lingle “religiously” schedules an hour a week to Torah study with Rabbi Yitzchok Krasnjansky. They meet in the Governor’s Mansion, review passages from the *Bible* and discuss their relevance to current events. Her sessions with

leadership in June, 2004. Meanwhile, the University of Hawaii as well as the Jewish community welcome frequent speakers from Israel.

When I asked her whether there was anyone who especially influenced her, Governor Linda Lingle unhesitatingly answered, “my grandmother, Ann Cutter.



Governor Linda Lingle at her inauguration party .

the Rabbi were especially enlightening during the war in Iraq, much of which was fought near places of biblical significance.

Although there is no Israeli diplomatic mission in Hawaii, the Israel Consul-General from Los

She came to America from Poland as a child, with little or no formal education, but she was focused on her family and it was from her that I received most of my values.”